DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 355 CS 201 809

AUTHOR Pooley, Robert C.
TITLE How to "Be" Somebody Important.
PUB DATE Oct 74
NOTE 9p.; Keynote Address at the 50th Anniversary of the Florida Council of Teachers of English State Conference (Daytona Beach, Florida, October 17-19, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Educational Philosophy; *English Instruction; Human Dignity; *Humanism; *Humanistic Education; Humanities; *Self Esteem; *Teachers

ABSTRACT

In order that English teachers may be important to themselves, important as teachers, and, through their behaviors, important to their community and to society, they must accept the challenge of being humanists. Ten characteristics describe humanists: (1) they revere life in all forms; (2) they have profound respect for the human mind and its freedom; (3) they have faith in human beings and their ability to create ideals by which to live; (4) they hold the search for truth to be a person's primary endeavor and defend the freedom of this search; (5) they stand in awe of creation and regard their place in the universe with humility; (6) they seek to create rather than to destroy; (7) they preserve an open and critical mind; (8) they respect independence of thought and action; (9) they are the inheritors, custodians, and teachers of the best in all the arts; and (10) they respect research in all fields, helping to integrate knowledge in the social and physical sciences with that in the humanities. (JM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED101355

HOW TO "BE" SOMEBODY IMPORTANT

Robert C. Pooley

Keynote address, Florida Council of Teachers of English, Daytona Beach, October 17, 1974.

I am deeply grateful to the Florida Council of Teachers of English for the signal honors you have so graciously given me. Last year I was surprised and delighted with the award of an honorary life membership in our association, and this year you have asked me to be the opening speaker at the 1974 convention. I am both proud and happy because of my long association with the English teachers of the state of Florida. Long before I first spoke in your state I heard much about you from my good friends Margaret Boutelle and Blanche Trezevant. We met annually at the conventions of NCTE at which times I learned of your troubles and successes, most notable of which was the organization and growth of this Council. Later my association with Dr. J. Hooper Wise and with Dwight Burton kept me up to date with the teaching of English in Florida. Unless I have forgotten an earlier engagement, my first public speech in Florida was at an English conference at FSU May 8-9, 1953 at which I am listed in our history as "chief consultant." I have a feeling that Nathan Miller asked me to address a Dade County audience even earlier than that. At any rate, since those days I have had the privilege under the friendliest guidance of Mrs. Kitty Mae Taylor to speak to and share conferences with you in many parts of this great state which I now claim as my home. My friends in our Council now are so numerous that I dare not mention any names for fear of omitting many who have been kind and gracious to me.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert C. Pooley

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

CS 201 809

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The theme of this conference is the verb "be" and I have chosen as the title of my address the words "How to 'BE' Somebody Important." About ten years ago I was charged with the responsibility of forming a curriculum in the language arts for the state of Wisconsin. It was in that period of time when "Sputnik" gave such prominence to the teaching of science and mathematics. I began my college career as a scientist and I have the greatest respect for research in science and the out-come of science in our daily lives. Yet I was annoyed and made indignant at the arrogance with which language, speech, and literature were pushed aside as of minor value. After all, without speech and communication, there would be no science at all, for without sharing, men's minds cannot grow. So I began to ponder what it is that we English teachers possess and promote that is at least equal to, if not greater than, the "scientism", which is a cast of mind, and "science", which is pure knowledge pursued for its own sake, without arrogance or pretentions.

It came to me quickly that we, the teachers of English, are the principal possessors of, and conveyers of, the greatest of all human achievements: the growth of knowledge about man and his highest cultural achievements, in that department of knowledge that we call "Humanism." The great advances in humanism were made in the 8th century B.C. when scientific thought was in its infancy. I do not mean to denigrate science; I want to assert that humanism and science are the two equal achievements of the human mind; that together they represent man's highest achievement,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and that we, as possessors and conveyers of the one, should be proud and confidant in our heritage. When we face this challenge, we also assume a tremendous obligation and responsibility.

What is Humanism? And what is a Humanist? These questions bothered me as I approached my curriculum task, for there is much less common agreement as to what a humanist is in comparison with the recognition of what a scientist is. I found that I could best answer the question, What is Humanism? by finding answers to the second question, What is a Humanist? This search led me to the following descriptive definitions; these are, as I see it, the distinguishing marks of the true humanist.

1. The humanist has a reverence for life in all forms, with sympathy and compassion toward all living creatures, especially those in distress. Leading humanists in our culture and in most other cultures deplore war because of the loss of life and the suffering of the survivors. However, as the novelists and poets of the last two World Wars have shown, the humanist does not duck responsibility; he fights and dies for what he deems to be the highest values.

2. The humanist has a profound respect for the human mind and for its freedom. He will permit no hindrance to its free range. Humanists the world over have endured punishments, imprisonment, exile, and death to maintain the principle that there may be no bars to the range of human thought and its expression.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

3. He has faith in human beings and in their power to create ideals by which they may govern their lives. The works of all the great philosophical and religious leaders through the centuries bear witness to this faith and its place in human life.

4. He holds the search for truth to be man's primary endeavor and he will defend the freedom of search against all oppression. I was impressed by the words of a novelist in a minor book of detective fiction, but a statement of profound wisdom: "You will never discover the truth if you think you know in advance what the truth ought to be." The mind must not be closed by any preconceptions, no matter how firmly fixed by tradition or personal satisfaction.

5. The humanist stands in awe of the wonders of creation and regards his place in the universe with humility. This humility is characteristic of the great philosophers and scientists; if you have read any of the non-technical works of Dr. Albert Einstein you know with what humility and awe he faced the wonders of the universe whose secrets he did so much to discover. On the other hand, I have met and known a number of professors of literature and history who may claim to be humanists but whose views of their own place in the universe are far from being humble!

6. The humanist seeks to create rather than to destroy; to encourage inquiry and discovery above all other human activities. Le me mention here one of the dangerous weapons of the humanist, the use of sarcasm and irony against an individual. Because

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

humanists are skillful with words, the temptation is great to score a point by the use of sarcastic words. The harrassed teacher, goaded to exasperation by the apparent density of a slow-moving student, may easily vent his irritation by a few cutting words that bring a quick laugh, but do irreparable harm to the victim. To hurt is to destroy; the humanist does not destroy but creates. He urges experimentation and does not laugh at or ridicule error.

7. The humanist preserves an open and critical mind, and is willing to put the most cherished of notions to the testing ground of examination and refutation. This characteristic is difficult of achievement, yet vital to human advancement. Because we believe our views, we defend them; because we defend them we convince ourselves they are right; those with differing views must be wrong. The true humanist must be ready to put every conviction to the test of honest opposition; only those views that sustain the impact of criticism can be tentatively sustained. I think it is John Mill who has pointed out that where a vast majority hold to a certain idea as truth, the real truth will be found among the few who dissent.

8. The humanist respects independence of thought and action, supports the right to be different, and upholds the right of inquiry even when inquiry threatens his firmest convictions. This characteristic is the putting into action of a critical mind. The humanist fights conformity because it is a powerful and dangerous force. It is Voltaire who said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will fight to the death your right to say it."

These are the words of a great humanist who by his own independence of mind did much to break the iron hold of conformity in law and religion which bound the minds of his contemporaries.

9. The humanist takes as his province what has been called, "the good, the true, the beautiful." This is only to say that the humanist is the inheritor, the custodian, and the teacher of all the best in the arts of literature, painting, sculpture, music and dance; he extols and preserves the best creations of the past, and does all in his power to encourage and support the continuity of these arts. He may dislike in varying degrees the new poetry, the new painting, the new music, but he does not restrict their right to be seen and heard; his historical mind reminds him that some of the most highly praised works in the arts in today's esteem were condemned as crude or barbaric when first seen, read, or performed.

10. Finally, the humanist respects the search for truth and knowledge in all fields, and does his best to integrate the findings of the social and physical sciences with all that he knows and cherishes in the humanities. The readiness to combine, unify, and integrate is a mark of the humanist. He does his best to bring all facets of knowledge into a working relationship of unity; he attempts to find common elements among specific facts to produce meaningful wholes and thus brings into harmony so far as possible all that he knows.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As I see it, these ten characteristics accurately describe the humanist and define what we mean by humanism. Obviously the characteristics are ideals. Few of us could consistently and without deviation live up to all of them. But they describe what most of us honestly strive to do and be.

So this is the point to which my meditations on the nature of humanism brought me. Within the limited scope of my abilities I have described the beliefs and actions of a humanist. These are the foundation stones upon which the worth and dignity of mankind rest.

Now, what does all this have to do with us, who claim the title of English teachers? It has everything to do with us. In the very act of choosing our subject to study and teach we have declared ourselves to be humanists. But often we have not known that we did so. If once we had a fleeting vision of the ideals of humanism, the humdrum duties and tasks of daily teaching have tended to dismiss these ideals from our minds. The purpose of my address tonight is to remind you of what you and I undertook in becoming teachers of English and to fling out the challenge of what we can truly become.

All ages are times of trouble. We are in a time of trouble now, largely of our own making; it is a real trouble which will not go away if we shut our eyes to it, or adopt a Pollyanna attitude. There is no doubt in my mind that this time of trouble will pass as all other times of trouble have passed. But we can do more than just wait. What we all need is not more money,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

or less inflation, or higher wages, or tax reliefs. What our nation needs at this juncture, and all mankind for that matter, is an intangible called "Faith." We need faith in God and His mercies and these we find in our personal religions, which we have agreed to keep personal and individual. But there is another faith in which we can all unite, which grows stronger and more effective in the world as we unite in it, and that is the faith of humanism. It is of tremendous importance to us at this time to have faith in mankind and in each other. This faith, I truly believe, is summed up in the descriptive characteristics of the humanist which I have analyzed in this talk. If you want to do something positive in the present crisis of our country; if you want to bring a new light and a new enthusiasm into your teaching; If you want to be a person of importance in your time and place; I challenge you to join with me in becoming the best humanist each of us is capable of becoming. Ponder over, meditate upon, and put into action those aspects of humanism which seem to you to be of deep human worth. If you will do this, I can guarantee to you that you will each individually become, first; a person important to yourself; second; a person important as a teacher; third; a person whose life and behaviors will render him important to his community and to society. I assert again, we cannot fail to be important if we live up to our vision of what the humanist is; it requires courage and faith and persistence but it can be done. I dare you to be a Humanist!